

Managing Organizational Communication

Scope—The subject of managing organizational communication encompasses formal and informal communication throughout an organization, including communication to employees, with employees and from employees to upper management. This toolkit reviews the basics of effective organizational communication, the importance of a communication strategy, the role of different communicators within the organization, types of messages and vehicles, training for better communication, and methods for measuring results.

Overview

Communication is a vital management component to any organization. Whether the purpose is to update employees on new policies, to prepare for a weather disaster, to ensure safety throughout the organization or to listen to the attitudes of employees, effective communication is an integral issue in effective management. To be successful, organizations should have comprehensive policies and strategies for communicating with their constituencies, employees and stakeholders as well as with the community at large.

The following communication topics are discussed in this toolkit:

- The impact of effective and ineffective communication on the organization and its employees.
- How to build an effective communication strategy.
- The various constituencies affected by the communicated information.
- Measuring results.
- How to select the appropriate audience for each type of message.
- The types of communication methods used in organizations.

Communication Strategy

The Importance of a Comprehensive Communication Strategy

Most HR professionals and organizational leaders agree that linking corporate communication to business strategy is essential to effective and consistent business operations. With a formal and comprehensive communication strategy, organizations can ensure that they:

- Communicate consistent messages.
- Establish a recognizable employment brand.
- Deliver messages from the top that are congruent with the organization's mission, vision and culture.

The impact of effective communication

Effective communication may contribute to organizational success in many ways. It:

- Builds employee morale, satisfaction and engagement.

- Helps employees understand terms and conditions of their employment and drives their commitment and loyalty.
- Educates employees on the merits of remaining union-free (if that is the organization's goal).
- Gives employees a voice—an increasingly meaningful component of improving employees' satisfaction with their employer.
- Helps to lessen the chances for misunderstandings and potentially reduces grievances and lawsuits.
- Improves processes and procedures and ultimately creates greater efficiencies and reduces costs.

The impact of ineffective communication

Ineffective communication may increase the chances for misunderstandings, damage relationships, break trust, and increase anger and hostility. Ineffective communication may stem from poorly aligned strategy, a failure to execute the strategy, use of the wrong communication vehicle, bad timing, and even nuances such as word choice or tone of voice. See *The Cost of Poor Communications* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/pages/the-cost-of-poor-communications.aspx) and *The 7 Deadliest Communication Sins* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/the-7-deadliest-communication-sins.aspx).

Two-way communication

HR professionals may initially think of communication mainly in the context of delivering messages to employees about business issues, policies and procedures, but *two-way communication* plays an essential role in a comprehensive communication strategy. Listening to employee issues and concerns builds loyalty and drives improved productivity. Organizational leaders can learn through listening about issues or concerns *before* they become formal grievances or lawsuits. They can also discover potential employee relations issues and learn about attitudes toward terms and conditions of employment. See *Three Steps to Turn Up Your Listening Skills* (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/Pages/0315-listening-skills.aspx) and *Open and Transparent Communication* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/pages/open-and-transparent-communication.aspx).

Building a Communication Strategy

To develop a communication strategy, employers should begin by linking communication to the strategic plan, including the organization's mission, vision and values; its strategic goals and objectives; and its employment brand.

Effective communication strategies:

- Safeguard credibility to establish loyalty and build trust.
- Maintain consistency to establish a strong employment brand.
- Listen to employees and to members of the leadership team.
- Seek input from all constituencies.
- Provide feedback.
- Prepare managers in their roles as organizational leaders.

A communication strategy includes the following elements:

- Highly effective strategies that are often top-down, with senior management setting the tone for a cascading series of messages.
- A budget that allows for the use of various types of communication vehicles depending on the message to be delivered and any unique issues associated with it.

- A process by which leaders evaluate any particular situation driving the need to communicate and from which key messages will emerge.
- A method for generating feedback and using it to shape follow-up messages.
- A customized delivery approach with communication materials that are easy to understand.

Constituencies

Everyone in the organization has a role to play in communication:

- The CEO and senior managers are ultimately responsible for setting the tone and establishing organizational culture. Key leaders should be coached on their role in ensuring effective companywide communication.
- The HR professional and communication leader also have critical roles, especially in challenging economic environments.
- Managers are responsible for daily communication with their employees and for relating to their peers and colleagues.
- All employees have a responsibility to voice concerns and issues, provide feedback, and listen effectively.

Training

Communication training may encompass any number of topics, including:

- Company communication policies.
- Effective writing and presentation skills.
- Train-the-trainer initiatives.

A strong training component will not only equip leaders to communicate effectively with their teams and other organizational leaders, it will also help them understand the appropriate communication channels and protocols.

Responding to employee issues

There is no better way to cause resentment among employees than to ask them for feedback and then fail to act in response to their concerns. Honest, constructive feedback from employees starts with trust and the understanding that employees can voice their concerns without fear of retaliation. See Employee Engagement Surveys: Why Do Workers Distrust Them?

(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/employee-engagement-surveys.aspx)

Dealing with external media

External communications—including public and community relations—may also be a part of an organization's communication strategy. HR professionals, in conjunction with public relations professionals and top management, should develop formal policies and procedures for dealing with external media.

Measuring results

While organizations generally agree that measuring and quantifying results of communication plans are beneficial, this goal is difficult to accomplish. Given the elusive nature of communication data, determining a cost-benefit ratio, for example, may be challenging. Did the organization fare better because of the manner in which it communicated crucial information about a merger or acquisition? Was the impact of a reduction in force on morale mitigated by the way in which employees were told?

Despite the difficulty of doing so, organizations should strive to collect qualitative and quantitative information to evaluate their efforts:

- Qualitative data may include anecdotal evidence that employees' attitudes were improved after the handling of an emergency situation or that focus group information supported the strategy for communicating benefits changes to employees.
- Quantitative data may include measures such as turnover rates, productivity rates and employee satisfaction benchmarks, as well as use of employee service center options.

See Measuring the ROI of Employee Engagement (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/book-blog/pages/measuring-the-roi-of-employee-engagement.aspx).

Audience

Identifying audience issues is a key task in ensuring effectiveness in any communication strategy. What is the ideal audience for a particular communication? The audience may include everyone who influences or is influenced by the information being shared. For the most effective communication, audience size must also be appropriate given the information being shared and whether interaction will be permitted. If organizations anticipate that employees will have a number of questions regarding a new and unique benefit offering or a new procedure, for example, audience size should be limited so that questions can be adequately addressed.

Communicating "up"

While much of a communication strategy is focused on imparting information to employees, another central component is permitting employees to have a voice with members of senior management. Having a voice is a critical employee relations issue that affects satisfaction and engagement. See 7 Tips to Increase Employee Engagement Without Spending a Dime (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1016/pages/7-tips-to-increase-employee-engagement-without-spending-a-dime.aspx) and Communicating with Two Ears and One Mouth (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/Pages/Communicating-with-Two-Ears-and-One-Mouth.aspx).

Geographically dispersed audience

Organizations may have multi-unit operations with a variety of worksites within a city, state or country, or even globally. The more geographically dispersed and the more interdependent these groups are in their need to work together to solve problems, the greater the challenges are to the communication strategy. See How to Use Technology to Support Remote Teams (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1017/pages/how-to-use-technology-to-support-remote-teams.aspx) and Communicating with Diverse Audiences (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/pages/communicating-with-diverse-audiences.aspx).

Diversity and global issues

Audiences for organizational communication may embody many dimensions of diversity: age, disability, ethnicity/national origin, gender and race, for example. Diverse audiences may have different perceptions and expectations when giving or receiving information, and these differences should be considered when developing messages to a broad audience. See Cross-Cultural Sensitivity and Communication (<https://blog.shrm.org/sasia/blog/cross-cultural-sensitivity-and-communication>).

Vehicles and Approaches

One of the major challenges in developing and executing communication plans is to select the best vehicles for delivering any given message to and from employees. With so many choices, such as face-to-face communication, electronic media, meetings, printed materials and webinars, the decision becomes quite complex. Is the communication best suited for an electronic message via e-mail or for a face-to-face meeting? Should communication be mailed to the home address of the employee if family members are affected by the news, such as in a benefits update, or is it best communicated in a meeting conducted on work time?

New forms of electronic media raise additional questions. With social media opportunities available to any individual, HR professionals may need to consider not only strategies to tap into this medium but also policies for employees using this medium to communicate among themselves. See *Texts and E-Mails vs. Oral Communication at Work: Which Is Best?* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/written-versus-oral-communication-.aspx) and *Study: Tech Miscommunications May Erode Employee Engagement* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/tech-miscommunications-may-erode-employee-engagement.aspx).

When selecting the best communication vehicle, organizational leaders should consider:

- **Timing.** The timing of the information may be imperative, such as in emergency situations.
- **Location.** Employees' location may affect this selection. Are all employees in one building, at multiple sites or situated globally? Do they work virtually?
- **Message.** Another issue that affects the decision is the sensitivity of the information. For layoff or termination information, most professionals agree that face-to-face meetings trump any other means of communication, but some issues may make these meetings impossible due to the geographic location of the employees, the number of employees affected and other factors.

Organizational leaders have many options, including the following, when selecting a communication vehicle.

Handbook

The employee handbook is used to communicate standard operating procedures, guidelines and policies. The handbook is also used to communicate the organization's mission, vision and values, helping to establish an organizational culture and employment brand. While most employee handbooks traditionally have been produced in print format, more organizations are moving toward an electronic format, allowing for easy updating, documentation and review, especially when all employees have access to computers. See *SHRM Employee Handbook Builder* (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/Pages/employee-handbooks.aspx).

Newsletters

Newsletters are used to communicate new information about the organization, its products and services, and its employees. Newsletters may be in print or electronic format and may be sent to the employee as well as to his or her family, especially when the news directly affects family members. Newsletters may be published on a regular basis (weekly, monthly, quarterly) or whenever the organization has news to report.

Town hall meetings

Town hall meetings are an option to gather employees together to share news, celebrate successes or communicate companywide information that affects all employees. These meetings are most effective when employees are physically located in one geographic area, but for some critical meetings, employees may be brought to one central location. Alternatively, town hall meetings may be held in various locations when employees are widely dispersed geographically or may be held electronically via webinars or teleconferences.

E-mail

Electronic communication is a fast and easy way to reach many employees at once. It may be best used when information is urgent, such as in emergencies. E-mail communication presents some difficulties because tone of voice and inflection are absent, making an ironic or sarcastic remark appear rude or harsh, which may not be the intended message.

Face-to-face meetings

Face-to-face meetings with employees are one of the best ways to relay sensitive information. During layoffs or restructurings or when handling employee performance issues, face-to-face communication is generally preferred.

Telephone

The telephone is another way to communicate information to employees. Whether it is used in the traditional sense when face-to-face communication is not physically possible or in more state-of-the-art communication via webinars or voice mail blasts, the telephone is a staple in communication vehicles.

Surveys/polls

Two-way communication is vital to any effective communication strategy, and developing formal tactics to listen to employees is essential. Employers can elicit fast feedback through surveys and polls about specific issues (like a new benefit or policy) or general concerns.

Stories

Storytelling creates a picture through words so that the message becomes memorable. Organizational leaders are beginning to understand how storytelling can be used as a powerful business tool to impart company culture, to create an employment brand, and to build trust and loyalty among employees.

Social media

Many individuals regularly use social media sites like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, not only for recreational purposes but as a business communication tool. Social media can help recruiters source top talent, help salespeople identify potential contacts and allow employees to keep in touch with their leaders. HR professionals should ensure that company policies are updated so that social media is used appropriately in the workplace. See Social Media Policy (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/socialmediapolicy.aspx).

Messaging apps

Messaging applications such as Jabber and Slack and chatbots that interact with applicants and employees through automation may be the future of workplace communication. The next generation of workers prefer chat and messaging apps over traditional e-mail. See Messaging, Collaboration Apps May Surpass E-Mail in Workplace Eventually (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/messaging-collaboration-apps-may-surpass-email-in-workplace-eventually.aspx) and What HR Professionals Should Know About Chatbots (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/hr-should-know-about-chatbots.aspx).

Virtual team meetings

Organizations may have employees located across the city or across the globe and may need to rely on virtual team meetings to get work done. Setting expectations and establishing protocols are vital steps in ensuring that communication will be effective. Since written communication, whether in print or in electronic format, can hide tone of voice, inflection and other nuances of communication, many work teams rely on videoconferences and Internet-based technologies to make virtual meetings more productive.

The "grapevine"

One of the most used and undermanaged tools for employee communication is the proverbial grapevine. Watercooler discussions are still a mechanism for employees to hear the latest news unfiltered by management, and they continue to be a source for employees in learning the inside story. Employers must be mindful that whatever formal communication strategy is used, the grapevine still exists and will be tapped by employees at all levels. The grapevine should not be discounted when considering the best tool to listen to and learn about employee issues.

Types of Messages

Types of Messages

The type of message sent is a major factor in choosing the appropriate communication channel.

Standard operating procedures

There are many ways to communicate policies and procedures—staff meetings, employee orientation sessions and one-on-one coaching, for example—but employee handbooks are still the best way to deliver a consistent message to all employees with respect to standard operating procedures.

General business updates

General organizational updates may be communicated through newsletters, e-mails or town hall meetings or in small group huddles.

Bankruptcy, downsizing and restructuring

Employers should use several different communication means to announce and update employees when an organization faces bankruptcy, a restructuring or a downsizing. Whether in regular briefings by top leaders—through voice mail blasts, e-mail alerts or town hall meetings—or in departmental or group meetings, the employer needs to keep employees apprised of whatever information may be necessary to keep the organization running smoothly. See *Layoffs Require Communication, Compassion and Compliance* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/layoffs-communication-compassion-compliance.aspx).

Benefits changes

Communication regarding employee benefits may greatly affect employees' perceptions of the value of their compensation package and, moreover, the value of their employment with an organization. Accordingly, benefits communications should be planned carefully using means appropriate to the circumstances: printed messages, virtual or face-to-face meetings, one-on-one briefings, and so on. Major benefits changes—such as a new carrier or new options—require a more comprehensive approach than the one used for routine updates. See *Make Your Benefits Website a Year-Round Hub* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/make-benefits-websites-a-year-round-hub.aspx).

Emergencies

Emergencies—such as those caused by weather, violent employee behaviors, natural catastrophes or terrorists—require quick and effective communication to ensure the health and safety of employees and their families. A comprehensive disaster plan, complete with communication strategies and standard policies for dealing with emergencies, should be a requirement for all organizations. See *Managing Through Emergency and Disaster* (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/managingemergencyanddisaster.aspx).

Merger or acquisition

Communication issues with mergers and acquisitions are a high priority for HR professionals. HR professionals must consider how to communicate new benefits plans, new operating procedures, a new company culture, revised organizational charts and myriad other issues during mergers and acquisitions.

Outsourcing

Organizations may find that some business functions are handled better through outsourcing. Communication is vital to explain the change and the rationale to employees, as well as in developing new strategies for communicating with the outsourced vendor.

Legal Issues

Some communications come with legal constraints and/or guidelines that impact the message being delivered or how the employer delivers the information. For example, employers may face charges of unfair labor practices as a result of how it communicates to employees the company's desire to remain union-free. See Union Communication Guidance: TIPS and FOE (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/labor-relations/pages/tips-foe.aspx).

Employers may also be limited in discussing employees' personal information; even in circumstances where there are no legal restrictions, employers are cautioned against breaching employee privacy in many circumstances.

See:

Should employers announce or post employee birthdays? (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/shouldemployerspostemployeebirthdays.aspx)

Does the HIPAA Privacy Rule prohibit employer announcements of births, employee hospitalizations or family medical emergencies to other employees? (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/canhipaarestrictemployerannouncingemployeesbirthofchild.aspx)

When Giving References, How Truthful Can You Be? (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0418/pages/when-giving-references-how-truthful-can-you-be.aspx)

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